



The Drone Dilemma

Safely out of harm's way, and sometimes thousands of miles from their targets, American pilots and C.I.A. officers use joysticks and computer screens to fly drones into places like Pakistan or Yemen to strike Islamic militants bent on killing Americans. From the start, the use of these unmanned aircraft has raised questions about the ethics of fighting wars as if they were video games. In this essay, Peter W. Singer questions whether drone warfare is eroding one of the most important powers Congress has—to declare war—and whether that undermines our democracy.

Just 10 years ago, the idea of using armed robots in war was the stuff of Hollywood fantasy. Today, the U.S. military has more than 7,000 unmanned aerial systems, popularly called drones.

Last year, these drones carried out hundreds of strikes in six countries (see box), transforming the way our democracy deliberates on and engages in war.

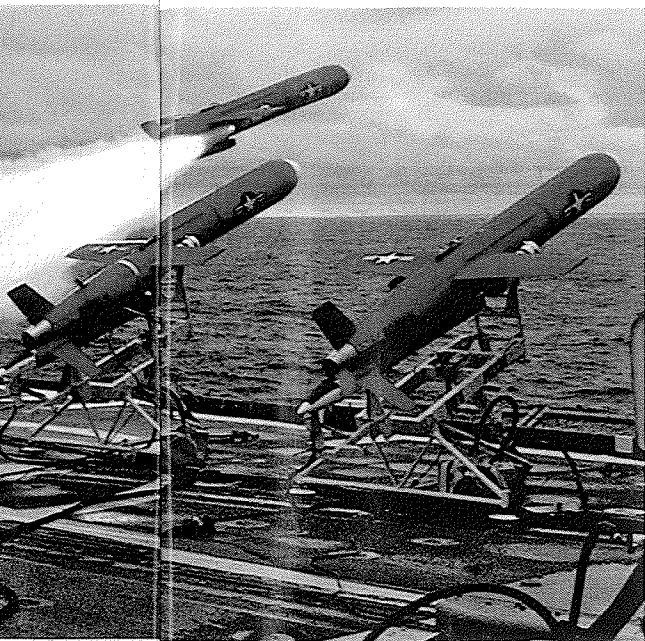
In democracies like ours, there have always been deep bonds between the public and its wars. Citizens have historically

participated in decisions to take military action through their elected representatives, helping to ensure broad support for wars and a willingness to share the costs, both human and economic.

The U.S. Constitution explicitly divides the president's role as commander in



LEFT: PITAKS/AP IMAGES (DRONE CONSOLE); RIGHT: CORBIS (DRONE ATTACK)



A PlayStation-like console (top left) is used to fly a drone in this demonstration of a top-secret drone guidance system. Drones are launched (above right) from a U.S. Navy ship off the coast of Japan. Pakistanis look at the damage done by a U.S. drone strike (left) in a village near the Afghan border.

bonds or pay war taxes anymore.

And now we have a technology that removes the last political barriers to war. With drones, we don't have to send someone's son or daughter into harm's way. But when politicians can avoid the political consequences of the condolence letter—and the impact that military casualties have on voters and on the news media—they no longer treat matters of war and peace the same way.

Killing a Radical Cleric

In 2011, drones carried out strikes from Afghanistan to Somalia. Last September, a drone strike in Yemen killed Anwar al-Awlaki, an American citizen and a radical cleric who preached *jihad*, or holy war, against the U.S. The most notable of these continuing drone operations is in Pakistan, where the U.S. has carried out more than 300 drone strikes since 2004. Interviews with militants in the region of Pakistan along the Afghan border leave little doubt that the drones have disrupted their operations.

"These efforts have been extremely precise and effective," says one senior U.S. official.

But in Pakistan, the public sees drone strikes as a violation of their nation's sovereignty and as responsible for the deaths of innocent civilians. The strikes have been a key factor in the diplomatic rift between Pakistan and the U.S.

"The drones are killing innocent bystanders, including children and women," says Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, a Pakistani opposition leader. "They must be stopped."

Back in the U.S., Congress has never debated the drone attacks; more than seven years after they began, not a single vote has been cast for or against them.

I support most of these strikes, but what troubles me is how a new technology is short-circuiting the decision-making process for the most important choice a

democracy can make. What would have previously been viewed as a war is not being treated like a war.

The new standard we've established is that presidents need to seek approval only for operations that send people into harm's way—not for those that involve waging war by other means.

The Predator drone has come a long way since the military began using it in 1995. In those early days, drones lacked even G.P.S. and did not carry weapons. The newer models can take off and land on their own, and their smart sensors can detect a disruption in the dirt a mile below the plane and trace footprints back to an enemy hideout.

It's becoming increasingly clear that drones are the future of warfare. There is not a single new manned combat aircraft being developed at any major aerospace company, and the Air Force is training more operators of unmanned aerial systems than fighter and bomber pilots combined.

Technologies like drones that remove humans from the battlefield are becoming the new normal in war.

Meanwhile, close to 50 other nations—including

China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran—have drone technology. So it is troubling to see the U.S. setting the precedent of military drone strikes outside of declared war zones. It's a precedent we'd be loath to see those other nations follow.

America's Founding Fathers may not have been able to imagine robotic drones, but they did provide an answer to this problem. The Constitution did not leave war, no matter how it is waged, to the president alone. In a democracy, it is an issue for all of us. ♦

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TARGETS

Countries in which the U.S. is known to have carried out lethal drone attacks:

Afghanistan

Iraq

Libya

Pakistan

Somalia

Yemen

SOURCE: THE WASHINGTON POST

chief in war from the role of Congress in declaring war. Yet this division is now under siege as a result of a technology our Founding Fathers couldn't have imagined.

For the first 200 years of American democracy, combat and risk—both personal and political—went hand in hand. In the age of drones, that's no longer so.

We don't have a draft anymore; less than 0.5 percent of Americans over the age of 18 serve in the active-duty military. We do not declare war anymore; the last time Congress actually did so was in World War II. We don't buy war